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The single that rocked a genre

By J. Hoberman

Like a Rolling Stone
Bob Dylan at the Crossroads
Greil Marcus
PublicAffairs: 290 pp., $25

Associated Press

HOW DOES IT FEEL? *Bob Dylan's "Like a Rolling Stone," this author says, was "a rewrite of the world itself." The 1960s audience loved it.*

BOB DYLAN'S "Like a Rolling Stone" was a rock 'n' roll jeremiad that blew minds and, at just over six minutes long, shattered radio formats when it erupted on the national airwaves 40 years ago this summer.

An all-out sonic and verbal assault on its audience's presumed sensibilities, the song might be said to have the same relationship to pop music that the calculated eyeball-slashing outrage of Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí's "Un Chien Andalou" had to the movies. And the audience loved it. "Like a Rolling Stone" peaked in early September 1965 at No. 2, behind the Beatles' cheerfully plaintive "Help!" — a song that might almost have been written to block Dylan's spiteful, gloating, and yet infectiously joyful, bolero rant.

Greil Marcus, a critic of formidable erudition and a writer of enviable fluency, has constructed his own school of American studies on a foundation of rock 'n' roll over the last three decades. In the Marcus pantheon, Dylan rivals Elvis Presley as the most monumental figure. In his new book, "Like a Rolling Stone: Bob Dylan at the Crossroads," Marcus meditates on the song's recording and reception, elaborates on its antecedents and describes its social moment. Marcus previously demonstrated the syncretic nature of Dylan's art and his dynamic appropriation of traditional folk material in his 1997 book, "Invisible Republic: Bob Dylan's Basement Tapes." Here, Marcus is extremely protective of the song itself; he writes around it, almost as if to preserve it from the taint of critical moss.

No less than Dylan's song, Marcus' book is a performance. It would be possible to construct an entire review just from his best asides and one-liners: Dylan, Marcus writes, has "performed as an employee in his own touring factory," but adds — quoting from and improving on the master — "he has also performed as if his name means nothing and his age means less." He describes a line from "It's Alright, Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)," as "sticking out of [Dylan's] mouth like a cigar." The song's third verse, an "announcement that the story is not over," Marcus writes, "is like Roosevelt announcing a third term."

Would that all the book's hyperbole were so witty. More evident is a wearisome strain of hard-sell opinionizing. "Like a Rolling Stone," Marcus writes, is "the greatest record ever made," perhaps even "the greatest record that ever would be made," although the album it appeared on, "Highway 61 Revisited," only ties the Rolling Stones' "Let It Bleed" as "the best rock 'n' roll album ever made." He also writes that Sam Cooke's "A Change Is Gonna Come" is "the greatest soul record ever made" and, what's more, "everybody who heard it knew it." This is scarcely the lone example of glib certitude. Marcus asserts that "there may not be another pop song or a folk song that begins with 'Once upon a time.' " Then again, there may be — the 1950s musical "Peter Pan" contained one, Frank Sinatra recorded another just a few months before Dylan cut "Like a Rolling Stone," and only the late British folk singer Ewan MacColl knew how many ballad variants open with those four magic words.

Why is Marcus so pushy? Why split a sentence to proclaim Dylan's 1997 "Time Out of Mind" CD "as complete and uncompromised a piece of American art" as three consecutive Philip Roth novels? Beginning in 1975 with "Mystery Train," Marcus' criticism has employed strategic juxtaposition: Elvis and "Moby-Dick," the Sex Pistols and Dada performance poet Hugo Ball. Name-dropping to establish pop-culture credibility is a venerable ploy. Richard Meltzer's 1970 spritz "The Aesthetics of Rock" is littered with references to Hegel, Nietzsche and Teilhard de Chardin. Of course, the Bard of Hibbing shanghaied T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound in "Desolation Row." But what was once provocative may now be pedantic. There must be a hundred books and a thousand PhD dissertations on Dylan. Does anyone dispute his importance? What white whale does Marcus imagine that he is pursuing? Harold Bloom's "The Western Canon"?

There is nothing that is not shamelessly hyperdramatized. "Like a Rolling Stone," Marcus says, is "a rewrite of the world itself," and Dylan "opens [its] second chorus as if he is unfurling the flag that Tashtego … nailed to the sinking mast of the Pequod." The singer of "Idiot Wind" is "at once Ichabod Crane and the Headless Horseman chasing him." During his May 17, 1966, performance in Manchester, England ("likely the greatest rock 'n' roll show ever played"), Dylan "shoulders ['Like a Rolling Stone'] as if he has never felt such a burden in his life." Has anyone? It's as if "The Scarlet Letter" were bleeding into "The Red Badge of Courage."

Marcus' most apt observations — that "Like a Rolling Stone" was rock not to dance to and that it owes more to Allen Ginsberg's "Howl" than any song — are tossed away, too obvious. But what's implicit is the idea that the song's very existence is a statement that trumps any exegesis. (In 1970, Meltzer called "Like a Rolling Stone" an attempt to liberate mankind from the tyranny of meaning.) But what keeps Marcus' project afloat is his capacity for close listening and ability to characterize what he hears: "In the fourth verse, everyone's timing is gone. …" He doesn't spend much time on interpretation — although he is anxious to defend the song against the charge that it is a cosmic put-down. Well, of course, who in 1965 would not want to be a Rolling Stone?

That was the summer Watts burned and the United States began escalating the Vietnam War. The week "Like a Rolling Stone" peaked, the folk-rock protest-song "Eve of Destruction" entered the charts, reaching No. 1 in late September with its baleful warning of a world "explodin', violence flarin', bullets loadin'." Written by a 19-year-old former surfer, P.F. Sloan, and hoarsely declaimed by former folk singer Barry McGuire, "Eve of Destruction" conflated nuclear anxiety, civil rights agitation and Vietnam protest, equated Red China with Alabama, and invoked slaughter in the Middle East. That it was also a coarse Dylan imitation made it all the funnier for being such a monster hit. Marcus nails the song, and its significance, in a sentence: "In that season, to hear 'Eve of Destruction' as a fake was also to recognize that the world behind it, a world of racism, war, greed, starvation, and lies, was real. …" To hear "Like a Rolling Stone" was something else.

There was a Dylan concert that summer at the old Forest Hills tennis stadium in Queens, N.Y., that, without apparent irony, Marcus characterizes as "a mass of people come together to fight a cultural war." Well, maybe: I was 16 and pop music probably never meant more to me than it did then. The Beatles had played Shea Stadium not two weeks earlier and, although I was a practiced gate crasher, I never got any closer than the stadium parking lot. No cops surrounded Dylan's concert, where the atmosphere was rich with generational self-awareness. The crowd good-naturedly booed Murray the K, an opportunistic local DJ drafted to introduce "Bobby Dylan," and demonstrated its high spirits by rushing the stage several times.

The song that impressed me that evening was "Just Like Tom Thumb's Blues" ("When you're lost in the rain in Juarez and it's Eastertime too. …"). Hearing those words for the first time was falling-down hilarious. I barely remember "Like a Rolling Stone." It may have been Dylan's last song, and quite possibly people sang along that night, something that would have struck me then as embarrassingly lame. Of course, anthem that it is, "Like a Rolling Stone" isn't at all difficult to sing. Anyone can and many did — not just Jimi Hendrix, but also the Turtles, the Young Rascals, Cher and even Nancy Sinatra. And it's fascinating to learn that Dylan, touring with the Hawks over the next eight months, was unable to get the song right — except that once in Manchester.

Arguably, Dylan never made another great single — although the mean-spirited satires "Positively 4th Street" and "Can You Please Crawl Out Your Window?" are transparent attempts to rebottle "Like a Rolling Stone's" spleen. (Of course, his follow-up was far more ambitious — the double album "Blonde on Blonde," his third LP in 14 months, with an entire side devoted to a single song.) But, then, he very nearly never made one great single. In a structural master stroke that shifts the whole architecture of his book, Marcus' epilogue details the 20 separate takes — only one of them usable — that Dylan and his sidemen recorded over two days.

"Like a Rolling Stone" was uniquely unique. Having devoted nearly 200 pages to the song and its cultural, musical and social place in history's marbled halls, Marcus leaves us to ponder something even more enigmatic and universal: that this history could easily never have existed at all. ■

J. Hoberman, senior film critic for the Village Voice, is the author of "The Dream Life: Movies, Media, and the Mythology of the Sixties."

Enduring allure of the oasis effect

By Charles Perry

Gardens of Persia
Penelope Hobhouse, photographs by Jerry Harpur
Kales Press: 192 pp., $49.95

YOU might buy "Gardens of Persia" just for the 150 photos of languid Persian gardens, but there's far more to it than that. Penelope Hobhouse has written a serious history of the Persian garden, tracing its roots as far back as ancient Mesopotamia. In effect, it's a history of Iran and its neighbors as seen through their gardens, a *jardin*-centric history.

Hobhouse casts a genuine new light on the region. Shahs, caliphs, emirs and merchants all built gardens, whether for pleasure or grandeur, counting on the soothing interplay of water, flowers and architecture. Gardens have been as important to the local sense of the good life as buildings. Leaving the gardens out of Middle Eastern history is like leaving the palaces out of European history.

Hobhouse is a leading English gardener: She laid out a garden for the Queen Mother and, with her late husband, John Malins, was in charge of the National Trust gardens for 14 years. But she is describing a garden tradition quite unlike that of the English, with its vision of the garden as a private share of unspoiled nature.

That idea was unthinkable in the Middle East, where nature was arid and hostile; from the first, Persian gardens were enclosed by walls. The classic *chahar bagh* (quadripartite garden) is a protected paradise of fruit trees and flowerbeds, crossed by four placid canals (Hobhouse calls them rills) meeting at a central pool. Some rills are gentle cascades; some are reflecting pools, such as those at the Taj Mahal. Hobhouse finds the *chahar bagh* plan in the ruins of Cyrus the Great's garden at Pasargadae, 6th century BC, and her diagrams of other Persian gardens show the stability of the design over the millenniums.

The Romans adopted features of the Persian garden for their villas, and Hobhouse traces its influence in India and Moorish Spain. In Central Asia, the fearsome military leader Tamerlane showed a gentler side by using gardens for public events, and as a result poets set many more of their verses among blossoming hyacinths and twittering nightingales.

This sort of garden is not for strolling in, like the English garden, but for sitting in. Despite the fact that gardening literature largely reflects the English tradition, here in the Southland we incline to the Persian sort of garden concept. We don't "go for a walk in the shrubbery" as people do in Jane Austen novels — we sit out in our gardens (under as much shade as we can contrive) with a cold drink. (If only we had the convenience of an *ayvan*, a sort of gigantic Persian alcove opening onto a garden, or at least a 40-columned pavilion fronting on the old swimming pool.)

Our climate is responsible for the design of our gardens, of course, and there's a historical link as well. The Persian garden reached us through Spain with the mission gardens. The photos and Hobhouse's descriptions can make even a nongardener want to see these marvels. She concludes the book with a plan for a garden tour of Iran, and one day that may be convenient to do. ■

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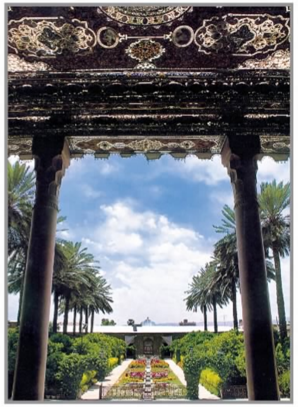

Photographs by Jerry Harpur Kales Press

LUSH LIFE: *At Naranjestan, an elegant Persian residence built in 1870, orange trees and date palms flank the walkway of a garden with roses, perennials and water features.*

MIRROR IMAGE: *A reflecting pool in the shrine of Ne'matollah Vali at Mahan symbolizes the oasis in the desert.*

LIQUID LANDSCAPE: *The public garden in Behshahr has a classic chahar bagh layout with canals and pools.*

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